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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BEIRUT 000198

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SUBJECT: LEBANON: A/FM MITRI ON IRAQI REFUGEES, ARAB LEAGUE
AND TRIBUNAL FUNDING

Classified By: Ambassador Michele J.Sison for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

¶11. (C) The Ambassador paid an introductory call on Acting Foreign Minister Tariq Mitri as Arab League Secretary General Amr Moussa was once again in Beirut seeking to mediate a resolution to the presidential election deadlock between the majority and the opposition. Mitri was not hopeful that Moussa would achieve a breakthrough on this third visit. He was more upbeat about generous financial support for the GOL from Saudi Arabia and for the Special Tribunal from Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and UAE. Mitri reviewed the progress he has made in easing the plight of illegal Iraqi refugees in Lebanon, noting that many will soon be able to temporarily legalize their status. The Ambassador requested Mitri's help in expediting the approval of the U.S.-Lebanon Bilateral Agreement for Economic and Technical Cooperation and raised the consular case of an American minor child and her Legal Permanent Resident (LPR) mother and sister in Lebanon, who are facing legal complications that prevent their departure to the U.S. End summary.

¶12. (C) The Ambassador, accompanied by DCM and Poloff, paid an introductory call on Acting Foreign Minister Tariq Mitri at his office in the Grand Serail on February 8. In a wide-ranging and relaxed discussion, the mild-mannered Mitri was once again generous with thoughtful advice and offers to help.

INITIATIVE STALLED, MOUSSA GETTING WEARY

¶13. (C) Mitri said that the prospects for the Arab League plan to resolve the election deadlock were not good; he tends to think the initiative will "die" if the parliamentary election session scheduled for February 11 does not take place. In any case, he expects Arab League SYG Moussa will leave Beirut as soon as possible (Moussa departed the morning of February 9) and added that Moussa is keen to focus on making the March 2008 Damascus-hosted Arab League summit a success. Mitri wondered that perhaps the Syrians would ultimately allow Sleiman's election by March, just to avoid having to invite PM Fouad Siniora to the summit.

¶14. (C) Mitri does not believe the Syrians want a presidential election at all, and that it is clear from Syrian FM Moallem's recent statements that the Syrians' (and the opposition's) trust in Sleiman as a candidate has eroded to the point that the opposition is demanding "political

guarantees," such as insisting that the 2005 Siniora government "ministerial declaration" be enforced. This is an unreasonable demand, in Mitri's view, since Lebanon's conditions have changed drastically since 2005 (but the demand is understandable because the 2005 declaration includes language favorable to Hizballah and other elements the current opposition would support).

¶15. (C) Mitri termed the January 27 Arab foreign ministers Cairo progress meeting, at which he represented Lebanon, a "setback" for the initiative, especially since other countries, including Saudi Arabia, were not fighting hard enough to contain Damascus. Mitri noted that the opposition has recently become far more aggressive in its criticism of the majority, insinuating that if the initiative fails, the blame will lie with the U.S., not Syria. Mitri also noted that that the opposition press was claiming that March 14 leader Saad Hariri's February 7 denunciation of Syria and Iran's "black scheme" to dominate Lebanon was ordered by the U.S.

¶16. (C) Although he believes that Saudi Arabia and some other countries friendly to the Siniora government are not being hard enough on Syria on the presidency issue, Mitri is pleased by the reports the Saudis will deposit \$1 billion in Lebanon's Central Bank and that Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and UAE will donate \$21 million for the Special Tribunal.

BRIGHTER FUTURE FOR IRAQI REFUGEES IN LEBANON?

¶17. (C) Ambassador asked about the latest on the Iraqi refugee situation in Lebanon, including what had been done with the \$2 million the Iraqi government had donated to

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Lebanon to help Iraqi refugees. Mitri said that the Iraqis had given \$2 million to the GOL, but had not specified that it was earmarked for aiding Iraqi refugees, or even whether it was for UNHCR Lebanon programs in general. He noted that this issue was discussed at a recent cabinet meeting, but still needed to be cleared up with the Iraqi government. A few hours later, Mitri called the Ambassador and read the language of the communication from Iraq that accompanied the \$2 million payment to confirm that the Iraqis did not make clear that the funds were to be used for Iraqi refugees. Mitri indicated it would not be a problem to use the funds for that purpose, however.

¶18. (C) Mitri assured the Ambassador that as a result of his meetings with the UNHCR, the GOL will start giving some Iraqi refugees in Lebanon three-month renewable temporary residence permits. Mitri hopes that, pursuant to a UNHCR request, the Surete Generale (the GOL agency responsible for dealing with immigration issues) will be more lenient in dealing with Iraqis caught without residency papers. According to Mitri, Lebanon's lack of an immigration law dealing with illegal entry, as well as the fact that it is not a signatory of any of the international conventions protecting refugees, leave the authorities no choice but to deal with illegal refugees as lawbreakers.

U.S.-LEBANON BILATERAL AGREEMENT STILL LANGUISHING IN THE MFA

¶19. (C) The Ambassador pointed out that completion of several important USAID projects was being delayed by the pending approval of the U.S.-Lebanon Bilateral Agreement for Economic and Technical Cooperation. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs is supposedly soliciting input from other ministries before approving the agreement. Mitri, however, characterized the MFA as currently dysfunctional, with only the most routine business being accomplished as a result of FM Salloukh's resignation in 2006. Mitri suggested the DCM meet with the MFA Secretary General or the MFA director of

Political Affairs in order to expedite action on the agreement. He does not believe that by becoming pro-active in this matter we would in any way jeopardize approval of the agreement.

AMCIT CHILD CASE

¶10. (C) The Ambassador raised the issue of LPR Zena Safi and her two minor daughters, one of whom is an American citizen. Safi, who fled her Syrian husband, has custody of her daughters, but has been refused permission by the director of the Surete Generale to leave the country, because she entered illegally from Syria. Mitri promised to look into the matter, suggesting that PM Siniora or Interior Minister Saba could speak with the director of the Surete Generale, the GOL agency responsible for immigration matters. (Note: Ambassador will see Surete Generale Director General Jezzine February 12 to discuss this and other matters. End note.)

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